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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY MEETING WITH VFM LE VAN BANG

1.(SBU) Summary: In a meeting with Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang on September 19, the Ambassador laid out his priorities and sought Bang's engagement in identifying specific areas where progress on human rights is possible. The Ambassador also pushed for progress on a new embassy compound, which Bang agreed should be resolved as soon as possible. End Summary.

2.(SBU) Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang, whose long career has included postings as Ambassador to the United States and Ambassador to the United Nations, opened by saying the U.S.-Vietnam relationship was based on "strategic ties." Past negatives such as the war had eventually led to positives such as the close cooperation on POW/MIA issues. Vietnam's move from enemy to friend with the United States could be an example for the DPRK, Burma or even Iran, Bang said.

13. (SBU) The Ambassador agreed that our countries have forged strong ties across many areas and that, as Vietnam prepares to take a temporary seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC), we look forward to cooperation in new areas. Bang said the UNSC seat would open new opportunities for Vietnam to play an active and positive role and that it will have to work closely with other countries to meet the new challenges of this role.

14. (SBU) Bang said that Vietnamese Americans could be a bridge between our countries. Noting that increasing our level of trade is a priority, the ambassador said Vietnamese-Americans could also be an important source of investment growth and cited President Triet's engagement of this community during his visit to the United States earlier this year as a positive step.

PROGRESS ON HUMAN RIGHTS A PRIORITY

15. (SBU) The Ambassador said progress on human rights is among his top priorities. He noted that meeting with dissidents is a critical part of his job, but that he wants to act in reaching out to the various elements of Vietnamese society in a transparent manner in the context of relations of mutual trust. Bang said the issues that Vietnam and the United States have on human rights are due largely to cultural and historic differences. Vietnam understands the political pressure in the United States to address human rights issues, Bang said, and much can be solved through cooperative dialogue.

16. (SBU) On religious freedom, Bang said churches and pagodas have an important role in teaching values which can be useful in the fight against corruption. The Ambassador agreed, saying progress on anti-corruption, transparency and good governance issues can also help attract investment. Noting Bang's long experience of dealing with the United States, the Ambassador asked for his assistance in assessing where real progress could be made on human rights in Vietnam. Bang said he welcomed this engagement and looked forward

to further discussion.

NEC: LET'S CLOSE THE DEAL

¶17. (SBU) The Ambassador said he understood that MFA was working hard to come up with a counteroffer on the New Embassy Compound (NEC). We need to be sure we are using the same language in our negotiations, the Ambassador continued, and there are market price estimates available which can be useful. Sooner is better to close the deal, Bang said, as land prices are going up in an area that is set to become a showpiece of Hanoi.

¶18. (SBU) Comment: Bang's role in the MFA hierarchy remains unclear following the elevation of Phan Minh Binh to the vice ministerial position supervising U.S. affairs. Bang appeared quite comfortable discussing sensitive issues, and gave no indication in this meeting that he is in the process of "fading away."

MICHALAK